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# A 1935 Yeti on the Rongbuk?

(*Plate 51*)

A local friend, Patsy Craven, was reading a review by Stephen Venables in the *Sunday Telegraph* of 6 August 2000 on Reinhold Messner's recent book *My Quest for the Yeti*, when she remembered that she had a postcard-size photograph of yeti footprints which on the reverse was pencilled 'Photo taken by Eric Shipton about 1935'. It had come from her stepfather Michael Roberts, who had married her mother in 1975, but died in 1977 in his 80s. He had commanded the 10th Gurkhas, retiring as a Brigadier. He had travelled widely in Nepal getting to know Eric Shipton quite well. He had been gassed in World War I, but attributed his recovery to breathing the high altitude Tibetan air. As he had a son also called Michael, currently in his 70s, living in Oxford, I wondered whether he was related to another Michael Roberts, the late Janet Adam Smith's first husband, but apparently not.

I tried to trace some reference to the footprints, but no book was ever written on the 1935 Everest Expedition led by Eric. Another friend Tony Astill is collecting material to remedy this deficiency. He tells me that no personal diary by Eric of the 1935 expedition has been recovered or is known to exist by the Royal Geographical Society, or by Peter Steele, his biographer, or by his son John. So we do not know precisely when or where Eric took this photograph (*Plate 51*) which shows a couple of rounded footprints together with the imprint of a booted foot and part of the shaft of an ice-axe stuck in the snow, for comparison. However, Tony reminded me of an incident in James Ramsay Ullman's biography of Tenzing recorded on page 93. When Tenzing was on his first Everest Expedition in 1935, his father, who was then living in Thame in Nepal, decided to cross the Nangpa La to visit his son in Rongbuk. Tenzing is describing various encounters with yetis and reports his father's story:

> One night he stayed alone at Camp One, on the glacier, while the rest of us were either at the base camp below or at the other camps higher up, and in the morning, when it was just starting to be light, he heard a whistling sound outside the tent. He raised the flap and looked out, and there was a creature a little way off, coming down the glacier from south to north. Again, of course, my father was frightened. He did not want to look at the yeti, but also he did not want just to hide in

> the tent, for fear it would then come closer, or even enter. So he stayed where he was until it had gone on down the glacier and was out of sight, and then he came as fast as he could up to Camp Two, where I was at the time. When he arrived he embraced me and said, "I come all this way to see my son. And instead what I see is a yeti."

One may conjecture that Tenzing's father relayed his frightening experience to Eric Shipton, who then went out in search of the tracks and took this photograph.

However, when Michael Ward was with Shipton in the Menlung basin in 1951 and they came across the 'yeti' footprints which have since been well publicised in the book of the 1951 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition and elsewhere, one might have thought that Shipton would have mentioned this 1935 incident. However, Michael tells me that he made no special mention of it other than to say, 'I have in the past found many sets of these curious footprints and have tried to follow them, but have always lost them on the moraine or rocks at one side of the glacier.' Nor do Warren or Kempson mention the incident in their 1935 diaries.

51. The photograph of 'yeti' tracks taken by Eric Shipton on the Rongbuk Glacier in 1935. (*Eric Shipton*) (p153)